

Telephone interview with former HM2 Randy Hudson, corpsman aboard USS *Hancock* (CVA-19) during Operation Eagle Pull and Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 16 January 2007.

Where are you from originally?

Lubbock, TX.

How did you end up in the Navy?

I know I wanted to be in the military because my dad was. But I was more interested in the medical field. After looking at all the rest of them, the Navy had what I wanted as far as training was concerned. So it was more of an interest in health care and the training that was available.

When did you enlist?

August of 1971. I was discharged in April of 1976.

Where did you go to boot camp?

Orlando.

How about corps school?

San Diego. They shipped me back and forth across the country. I hope they're a little more efficient about it nowadays. Boot camp in Orlando, San Diego for corps school, and my first duty in Portsmouth, VA. Then I went to school in Oakland, CA. Back and forth and back and forth.

How did you end up on *Hancock*?

I don't really know; I just got orders there. I had surgery at the Naval Hospital at Oakland and had orders at the time to go to the 3rd Marine Division. Of course, because of the surgery, they cancelled the orders. Then I got orders to USS *Hancock*. It wasn't my choice; it just happened that way.

When you got there, where were you assigned?

Being a corpsman, I was assigned to sick bay. My training at Oakland was in preventive medicine so that was my specialty. On *Hancock*, I was given a tiny office in sick bay and after that I didn't have much to do with anybody else because it was such a unique specialty.

When did you get to the ship?

September of '73. We were in drydock at the time. We didn't have our first shakedown cruise until about a year and a half later. It was a messy place. There was a lot of dirt and a great deal of painting going on. It was really a messy, loud place to be for a long time.

And it wasn't exactly the most modern aircraft carrier around at the time.

It was the Navy's oldest. We knew this was going to be the last WESTPAC cruise.

About the beginning of April of '75, did you have any idea that you would be involved in the evacuation? Were you following the news at that time?

When we got underway, we thought we'd go to Hawaii, and then the Philippines. We had no idea until we were about halfway to Hawaii. The skipper got on the IMC and said that we were changing course. He filled us in on things. Back then, we had no Internet so we believed everything the skipper said. He was the source. He told us we were going to be involved in a bigger operation and that our role would probably remain support. In Hawaii, we'd probably let the air wing off and we'd take aboard helicopters. Then we'd be designated as an LPH for a while.

After we left Hawaii and headed for the Philippines, we thought we'd probably just float around there, not getting really involved with any of the activity because of the age of our carrier. We didn't realize what was going to happen.

When we got to the Philippines, we weren't there very long before we went back out. Apparently, things started to get a bit hotter. The skipper then told us that the situation was quite precarious.

And he was referring to Vietnam.

That's right. We still didn't think we were going to take aboard any evacuees. Initially, that operation was mostly air-evacuations from the airport in Saigon. But after the enemy bombed the airport in Saigon, we began conducting helicopter evacuations. Things escalated from that point and people started descending on the embassy. You know the rest of the story. They were plucking people off the embassy roof.

What was your first encounter with the refugees?

We got the news that we would be taking on a few. I was involved in environmental health. Our senior medical officer reminded us that they would be coming from a plague-endemic area. When they landed aboard the *Hancock*, they would have to be dusted with Lindane. In addition, as a safety precaution, those of the crew who had not had the plague immunization, received shots. I can tell you that it's one of the worst ones I've every had.

Painful?

That plus the fact that it has side-effects. At that time it was given with the air gun that we used to use. So it was painful to get it. And for the next 12 to 24 hours it was a little uncomfortable.

We were then instructed, when they came aboard, to start dusting them with Lindane. We had those old fashioned sprayers with a hand pump. That was my first encounter with these folks when they came off the helicopters and came into the superstructure. Prior to that, we were given some rudimentary Vietnamese lessons. I don't know whether we were speaking gibberish or we were actually speaking the language. Yamaki, which means "Cover your eyes, and then turn around so we can spray you down." In retrospect, I wonder if any of that spraying was very effective or even necessary. It was kind of dignity issue to me. I looked at it several years later and said, "What a welcome to America!"

What kinds of folks were you seeing--all age groups?

There were some elderly. Some with children. Some our age. There were more children than I expected to see. I don't know why that was a surprise to me. That was the age group that

wanted to get out more than everybody, that is, the ones with children. They wanted to protect their kids. But they were all ages.

What was their general condition?

We called them refugees but they weren't in wretched condition. They were from Saigon, a big city. If you compared them to us, they were mostly middle class. None of them were in rags. They were probably in pretty good condition.

Did they appear to be relieved to be on the *Hancock*? Did they appear depressed?

There was an air of excitement. I suspect that many were pretty frightened having taken a helicopter ride. They had just left their country--their home. I don't know if anyone had an outright panic attack but there was definitely an air of excitement and urgency. "Come on! Get out of the helicopter! Get on down here!" It all moved so fast.

Did you see any of the helicopters land?

Oh yes. I saw a lot of them. It was complete chaos. It's amazing that we only had one casualty and that was a Marine helicopter. To this day, I'm still very surprised that we didn't have any mid-air collisions. They were coming from all over and from every direction. You would have thought that there would have been some air traffic control. They were coming so frequently that the sky was dark from jet exhaust.

Were they mostly Hueys?

Yes but there were also some Chinooks. But I think they were ours, flown by Marine crews.

And I imagine they were just packed with people.

Yes. I understood that many of the helicopters were ready to run out of fuel so it was getting pretty desperate. The large loads of people came in the Chinooks.

I've seen photos of the flight deck filled with so many helicopters that they had to start pushing them over the side. Did you see any of that?

Yes. I saw a little bit of that. I saw them throwing them over the side. I couldn't believe that they were throwing these helicopters overboard. I understand that they salvaged as much of the avionics as they could from them before they shoved them over. I saw them shove two or three of them overboard. It was just amazing. I don't know how many went over but I know it made the evening news.

In our hangar bay was a very nice helicopter from the CIA. It was painted silver. I don't know how it got aboard.

Once you finished dusting the refugees with Lindane, what happened next?

Once we got them all on board and we were steaming toward the Philippines to drop them off, the whole hangar bay was just filled with people. It was very crowded. We had the opportunity to go up and visit with some of them. Most didn't speak very good English but I did get some Vietnamese money as a souvenir. I got one 1,000 Dong note and some coins. One thing I found rather amusing and unusual were these wooden troughs that had been set up rather quickly on the port and starboard sides. Seawater was moving along the troughs and then

emptied near the fantail. I said, "What in the world is that thing for?" And they told me it was toilet facilities. They didn't want all those people wandering all over the ship to find a toilet.

But the refugees didn't use the troughs for that purpose at all. They were washing their clothes in them. I don't know whether they were also using them for toilets or not. They may have been washing their clothes up forward and then toileting aft.

What was done about feeding all these people?

That took a long time. They went through the enlisted mess deck. I don't know whether they ate down there or brought their food up to the hangar bay, but it took hours and hours to get through the chow line. So I avoided that and had a few snacks up in my office. In fact, there were times that I ate only one meal a day.

What were the sleeping arrangements in the hangar bay?

Everybody was all spread out and slept on the hangar deck. Some had their own blankets and we may have issued some. Everyone seemed to have brought a bag containing their most prized possessions.

Did you have any medical issues to deal with before you got to the PI?

The mother of twin 6-year-old girls had appendicitis. We brought her to sick bay and did an appendectomy. Some other fellows and I baby-sat those two little girls. They were cute kids. They didn't speak a word of English but we kept them entertained.

We didn't have the luxury of having an anesthesiologist. If I recall correctly, one of our dental officers did the anesthesia. The woman recovered quite well.

Before nurse anesthetists were assigned aboard carriers, it was customary for dentists to act as anesthetists.

I did not know that. I don't recall any other medical issues.

I wasn't involved in this incident, but one of our Marine helicopters went down and one of the crewmen was recovered very seriously injured. I wasn't involved in direct clinical care so wasn't involved in that.

Being more concerned with environmental and possible disease outbreaks, you say you didn't see any of that.

Not during that time with the Vietnamese. But afterward, we had a pretty significant salmonella outbreak among the enlisted. Boy, were we sick, myself included. There was so much Kaopectate going around that ship. It was awful! It was the worst gastroenteritis I ever had. We thought it might be from a contaminated ice-dispensing machine.

What was your rank at that time?

I was an E-5--an HM2.

Where did the ship end up in the Philippines, Subic?

There were some facilities there at Subic. The refugees were off-loaded. I heard that a lot of them went to Guam. Many years after I got out of the Navy, I was director of a gastroenterology lab here at the university. We had a GI fellow who was Asian. I asked him where he was from and he said he was originally from Vietnam. I asked him how he happened

to get here. He said, “When Saigon fell in ’75, we were transported by helicopter to an aircraft carrier.”

“Which carrier was that?”

“It was the USS *Hancock*.”

I never got to talk to that fellow again. What an interesting coincidence and a neat story.

So you haven’t had any contact with any of those refugees afterward.

No.

When did you leave the Navy?

I left in 1976.

What did you do then?

I went to nursing school. While there, I thought of going back and getting my commission. It didn’t happen because I fell in love and have been married for 28 years now. I’m an RN now and work at a small specialty hospital here in Lubbock, where I’m director of education. The hospital is the Southwest Regional Medical Complex.

It’s been over 30 years since all that happened. Do you ever think about it anymore?

I think about it a lot. I think about the Navy a whole lot. In fact, this summer I will be visiting the USS *Lexington* at Corpus Christi. And that will be the first time to be on a carrier since I left 32 years ago. It’s going to be an awesome experience for me.

Addendum by Randy Hudson

Shortly after returning to NAS Alameda in October 1975, the Navy ordered the demise of the USS *Hancock*. This was the end of a proud tradition. This fine lady of the seas would be stripped of all its valuable contents and the hull would be scrapped. A sad ending for years of noble service. After Christmas 1975, the process was begun in earnest. Most of the work was to be done by civilian contractors and a skeleton crew of what was once the ship’s company.

The majority of the ship’s officers and men were quickly dispersed to the far corners of the globe for new assignments. I was transferred to the Field Medical Service School at Camp Pendleton, California. Due to an injury in one of my knees during my training, I was assessed and given an honorable discharge with a VA connected disability. I was finally out of the Navy and returned home to begin a new chapter in life.

A couple of decades later I met a sailor who served in Operation Desert Storm. He informed me that he, too, had served during Operations Frequent Wind and Eagle Pull. He asked me if I received all my service awards for participation in those two operations. I was not aware that any had been awarded. In the commotion that ensued subsequent to the decommissioning process, I suppose the Navy simply overlooked the presentation of awards to a large number of us who had served in those operations. I wrote the Navy to inquire about the awards I was due. Several months later to my surprise, I received a package that contained a number of medals and ribbons, all from service during the last days of Vietnam. I walked out of the Navy with the National Defense Award and the Good Conduct Award. Now before me was the Armed Forces Expeditionary Award, the Humanitarian Services Award, the Meritorious Unit Citation, the

Navy Unit Citation, and the Sea Deployment Citation. I was grateful to receive these, but regretted that I had not had the opportunity to wear them during active duty.

In 2002, a local chapter of the American Legion in Lubbock, Texas, began plans and construction of what is considered to be one of the largest veteran's memorials west of the Mississippi River. I followed the project closely and looked forward to the formal dedication of this impressive memorial. At this site are tens of thousands of veteran's names engraved in bricks. There are seven Hudsons at the site: myself, my brother, my dad and uncles. The name of my father-in-law, a World War II naval officer, is also there. It is a very impressive site that I consider to be hallowed ground.

During the year or so of construction, I lost enough weight to fit into my uniform. This was nearly three decades after I last wore it! I always wore that uniform with pride and was no prouder than I was on that day. This day I was in my full dress blues with all my service awards. To make it more special, I was able to share the moment with my wonderful wife, my son, and my dad and other family members. It was a day I will never forget. Today my service awards are framed and proudly displayed in my office next to a photo of the USS *Hancock*. I am reminded every day I walk into my office that I had the opportunity to serve my country.

To make the event even more poignant, I believe our Vietnam veterans were finally given a word of gratitude and a warm thank you. What a tragedy that so many Vietnam veterans returned home to a country that viewed them with contempt and rejection. The Vietnam War was extremely divisive and created such dissent in our country. The cynicism and hostility of a divided nation was unfortunately taken out on those who neither started nor ended the war.

It is my fervent prayer that those who serve today in our global war on terrorism will not meet the same fate. Once again our nation is divided by a war that seems to have no end in sight. It is my prayer that Americans will have the wisdom to know the difference between our men and women in uniform and the partisan politics that tend to polarize our culture. Fortunately, those who serve and those who have served see a much bigger picture than those who fight the political wars. Those in uniform have sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States. Theirs is not to question why, but to do or die. They live by the chain of command and absolute obedience. These are America's finest. They always have been and they always will be. There is a camaraderie that is stronger than blood among those who have worn the uniform. There is a spirit that lives on in the heart and soul of all who served. A ticker tape parade or simply a warm handshake--all should be welcomed and none forgotten for the noble sacrifices all have made. Some have given all but have given some. God bless the United States of America and God bless our veterans.